

Dharma and Mutual Benefit

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So what I had in mind this morning was to say just a few words, if I'm capable of that, and then open up more to your questions or comments. Questions mostly. If you have any questions, like to explore some aspect of practice, we could do it that way.

So the words are that, in thinking about this as being what some people call the holiday season, sometimes it is called the season of peace occasionally. And *nirvāṇa*, or awakening, is sometimes said to be characterized by peace. Peace is a very important aspect of this practice, the aim of the practice. Hopefully, we can become more peaceful people in many ways.

But interestingly, the *Dharma* is not characterized by peace, though *nirvāṇa* is sometimes characterized by peace. The *Dharma*, it's said in a very ancient kind of saying in Buddhism, is characterized by nonviolence. Interesting. And then it's understood in this ancient Buddhist tradition that whenever you have the antonym in front of a word, it often implies the positive quality. It's actually not just simply the absence of something, but the presence of something, the antonym.

So nonviolence is understood to be compassion. So one of the qualities, or the characteristics, of *Dharma* is nonviolence or compassion. And so what's the relationship between peace and compassion, or peace and nonviolence?

I think the *Dharma* here is meant to be the teachings of the Buddha, the practices the Buddha taught, some of the qualities that develop in a person, some of the patterns that unfold for people as they do practice. And that the *Dharma*, the teachings and the practice, is characterized by nonviolence. And what I like about this is that peace can be seen more as being just me. You know, you sit in quiet meditating, you become peaceful. Hopefully that peacefulness kind of radiates or benefits others as well.

But peace has no quality in it of being interactive. And there's something very profound about that peace. Nonviolence, in a sense, is noninteractive peace. The peace that is not defined by self, not defined by other, that is liberated from self and other, is a very profound thing. But the *Dharma* is interactive, is connected.

And sometimes when people do my practice, they forget that the *Dharma* is something that has to do with relationship or interconnectedness. And that the *Dharma* is characterized by compassion or nonviolence. And this reminds me of a repeated teaching of the Buddha where he said, "A wise person considers what is beneficial for oneself, what is beneficial for others, and what is beneficial for both self and others." And for a long time I thought this was just kind of emphatic rhetoric. Self, others, and self and others, just, you know?

But I think this idea of a wise person engages in their life with some concern, some consideration, for what is beneficial all around, not just for me. So certainly the Buddha cannot be criticized as just offering a self-centered kind of practice, because he was very concerned about how we live our life to be of benefit to others as well. But then this very interesting statement, beneficial for self and others, started me thinking about this some more this last week when I heard on the radio a discussion about vaccines. It sounded like a flu vaccine, or any kind of vaccine, but take a flu vaccine.

So I could take a flu vaccine, and supposedly that's supposed to be beneficial for me. Great. But when I take a flu vaccine, also one of the reasons I do it is I have a little kid at home who has asthma, and it protects him. It's not good for him to get the flu. So I become a buffer, a small buffer, one-person buffer, between whoever does have the flu and my son, because I don't get it.

So if, you know, if 80 percent of us in this room have the flu vaccine, we provide a big buffer for those 20 percent who don't. Now, some people can't have the flu vaccine because they have immune problems. They have a variety of conditions. It prevents them from taking the flu vaccine. So the 80 percent of those people who do take it actually supports the people who can't take it.

So it's beneficial for us. It also benefits others. And the discussion was that when parents don't vaccinate their kids, which some parents don't do because they feel there's all this mercury and dangerous stuff in the vaccine, it's a reasonable concern for parents to have. However, they then rely on all the kids, all the parents and families who are vaccinating kids all around them, for getting a wonderful buffer. And so it's a little bit self-concern. You know, I'm going to take care of my kid and let everyone else create the wonderful environment around me where I'm buffered from all these terrible diseases.

So it's interesting how, you know, the interaction, the interrelatedness there that we have. And so how is it that I'm practicing the *Dharma*, or practicing living our life? How do we consider not just self, not just others, but also the mutuality, the interactivity of all of us, how we work together?

And so here, coming here to practice at IMC, some people who practice in this area find it very beneficial to sit together with other people, and they feel supported by others, you know. Some people say, "It's harder for me, hard for me to sit at home still for as long as I sit here. But here it's easier because I feel the atmosphere of the group." One example. So we're benefiting from all this.

So then people who feel that way are benefiting from the group. That's nice. However, that person who's getting that benefit is also providing that benefit to someone else. Isn't that nice? And sometimes people don't remember that. Oh, the fact that I showed up and sat here, I'm supporting someone else, a human who maybe needs the support.

And perhaps some of you are quite content and happy to meditate alone at home. However, when you come here, your presence also offers a certain kind of support for other people. So this mutuality, so the *Dharma* is that a wise person considers how we benefit self and others.

Practicing generosity is meant to be beneficial for you. It opens your heart, develops wonderful qualities, is a source of joy and happiness for you. And hopefully, clearly, being generous is beneficial for others. But it's also beneficial for the whole system, for self and others. Because as we create an environment of generosity around us, then people treat us differently. People treat society differently.

And I think that one of the things that we have here at IMC, I hope, is we have a field of generosity into which many people come and benefit, because it's a level of trust and goodwill that is kind of built up as a kind of community level, not just, you know, one on one or something like that. Making some sense, do you?

So the *Dharma* is characterized by nonviolence or by compassion. It speaks to this interactive quality that *Dharma* practice is about. And so when we practice, I think it's helpful to consider: how is it? How are we kind of interacting, and how are we being supportive?

When we do look at ourselves directly in practice, then the *Dharma* practice being characterized by nonviolence is a very helpful kind of reminder. Can we be nonviolent or compassionate to what goes on inside of us? What happens to us? We meet what happens here.

I was very touched recently. I went to a class meeting, my son's class parent meeting, and

of several of the parents, one in particular spoke and said, "You know, I think that my daughter is one of the more difficult children in the class." And I knew from other parents that it's something talked about in the bushes. And so I knew that the young girl was a little issue.

And here the mother who sat there said, "You know, I think my daughter is one of the big problems in the class, and I'm challenged with my daughter. And we spend a lot of time at home trying to figure out how to work with my daughter, and how to work with her behavior, what's going on." And as she spoke, it certainly opened and softened my heart toward her and toward the daughter to hear that.

But what impressed me so much was the very honest, taking-responsibility, but kind of matter-of-fact way in which this woman was willing to kind of expose herself and say, "This is what I am struggling with," almost as if it wasn't a problem. It was a problem to address, but almost like, undefensively, kind of with tremendous acceptance. And then it was very sad to see that some of the parents who responded to her didn't have the same broad acceptance. One of the parents spoke up, "Oh, you know, it really starts at the family, you know?"

And so here was someone who was willing to kind of say, "This is my situation," undefensively, kind of broadly accepting, you know. I felt she was kind of compassionate for herself and the situation. And then she got, you know, stabbed a little bit. But I'm so inspired by people who can speak: "This is the situation. You know, I'm neurotic. You know, I'm afraid. Or I have this issue with anger, and this is what I'm working with." And just, you know, there isn't any criticism or added animosity toward oneself, hostility for having it.

This is this. This is what's going on. That's what I'm working with. Not acceptance in the sense that, great, I'm just going to continue being angry. But yet I am an angry person, and this is what, you know, my situation is. And I don't need to be embarrassed or defensive about it. I'm doing my best.

So how can we meditate with that kind of approach, to have that kind of honesty about ourselves? Here I am. This is what the situation is. Not being defensive about it, not being offensive about it, but to meet it in this nonviolent approach, this compassion approach. That's the quality of the *Dharma*. How to sit here with that?

When we do that, that tends to be conducive to peace. How to have peace. And not, "I'll be peaceful." It'll be peaceful about who we are and what we are. And my hope, and I think my understanding, is that that level of peace, nonviolent peaceful approach, not being in conflict with what is, is one of the best avenues for discovering the peace of awakening, the peace that steps beyond the concepts we have, the limits we have, the boundaries we have

of self, into this great kind of possibility of being alive without all these concepts and ideas that limit us.

When the Buddha analyzed violence, he said one of the primary conditions for the arising of violence is people living in a lot of hard and fast concepts. So being able to have the capacity of softening the hard and fast concepts, and being relaxed, I like being relaxed, is a stepping stone to peace. To be relaxed about this, and softening the concepts. And so when we meet others, we don't meet them with hard and fast concepts, but rather we meet them with soft concepts and ideas that are flexible and valuable when open and willing to shift and change accordingly.

So awakening is characterized by peace, but the *Dharma* is characterized by compassion. So those are my few words. And if I know it's your turn in our mutual interactive engagement of the *Dharma*, now I turn it over to you. We'll see where we go.

Thank you for that talk. It was really great. And I'm off on another trip, but I think it has something to do with the season, just thinking about joy and gratitude. And, you know, sometimes when I tune into my body, I notice obstructions in different places. And so sometimes I have an obstruction to the joy and gratitude that I'm feeling. And as I do the obstruction, I seem to deepen into joy and gratitude. So I'm wondering if you could just say some things about deepening into joy and gratitude.

Well, I'll tell you the first thing that comes to mind is, oh, you know, it's a thing to be expected that human beings will have obstructions and tensions and difficulties of a variety of different kinds, attachments, clingings. Normal. And sometimes I'll sit with some tension in my body that I have, and it would be nice if I could just do the magic wand of mindfulness and just make it all go away just like that. But it doesn't usually work that way. It sometimes takes a while for it to dissolve and settle and all that.

But I get a lot of joy that I have a practice that can meet those things. So it's one thing to be concerned about how quickly they go away, how quickly they get fixed. But it's another thing to know, I don't know how long it can take, but I have a practice that can meet this and be honest by it, that offers me a path through it and with it, and helps me to find a place to be peaceful with it or compassionate with it. And maybe I won't succeed today, but I'm so glad that I have a practice. So that brings me joy.

And what that does is that it also involves a shift of attention or focus from the problem, from the object, to the subject. And as I said, some of my unaware ways may be here, but there are three things involved in a problem. There's the problem that we have, and many of you

can probably dream up, think of all kinds of problems you have. Most people, most human beings, have problems. It's *homo problematicus*, or rather, I hope it's *homo sapiens*.

And so then there's the problem, and then there's our relationship to the problem, how we relate to the problem. And then there's the subject, the person who has the problem. And most people focus on the problem. But if you focus on the subject, sometimes if the subject disappears, then the problem, you know, goes away.

So, you know, for example, this is a terrible example. But for example, if I'm concerned that people see that I have a certain status, and then the problem is that people are not treating me with enough respect for my status, so I could address the problem. Those people out there, I can educate them. Or I could look at the relationship and say, "Well, you know, they just don't know. You know, they don't understand, and that's okay. I'll just leave it, leave it alone. I'll be relaxed." Or I could look and say, "Look, Gil, you seem to be caught up in the status thing. Why don't you just dissolve that?" So I dissolve the status thing, and poof, I don't have a problem with those people anymore.

So when we focus on the practice, the *Dharma*, it helps us to step out of the orbit of the problem. And now we don't live in the problem anymore. And when we don't live in the problem anymore, then we can still address it and be responsible for it, but our identity is not tied to it. We don't define ourselves by that. So part of what we do is we shift the identity, the understanding of self, in relationship to it as well. Does that make some sense? You're talking about how it plays. Let me think, hehe, yes. But so it was a great question.

Your first question, deepening joy that way, and maybe other people here today will have other comments, because this is a season of taking vows or things we want to change with the new year or the solstice or something. I was reminded of a practice that a teacher somewhere in Marin County taught me one time. And her name was Wendy, and I don't remember her last name. And she wasn't the gardener. She was quite a teacher.

But anyway, every year she would take a quality that she wanted to work on, like generosity or kindness or something. And then she would remind herself all year that, "Well, if I were more kind, how would I have responded in this situation?" Or, "If I was more patient, would I have said what I said?" And remarkable that you remember to do it, remember it all year. But it gives you an avenue to make the practice of wanting to be more patient, instead of just saying, "I want to be more patient this year, and I want to be more kind this year, and I want to be more generous this year," it breaks it down into some way that we might actually learn how to take more of that quality in. Beautiful.

Thank you. It brings you joy. I do that way when I remember to do it.

Hi, I really appreciate the comment that you made, Gil. And I was thinking about ease, because you were talking about compassionate loving-kindness, and how some people respond in a way that's very maybe violent or more constricting. And so I was thinking, you know, I grew up in a very violent atmosphere, and I'm sure some people, whether they wanted to or not, they've been exposed to very severe violence in the form of war in their countries and things.

And I found that by practicing a certain type of movement, I was really shocked because it was kind of like moving meditation, not practice, but something else. And I noticed, wow, you know, I never felt this ease or this spaciousness before, because I was always doing things in such an extreme way. And a lot of my movements were like that. And so this was allowing me to feel more at ease and comfort internally. And I think that would lead to responding with more peace and ease, and then give other people that chance also to be who they are without responding in a way like you're saying, offensive versus, I don't remember the other word, defensive and offensive, but just coming from a place of spacious ease.

And maybe I just answered my own question while I was doing it. I was going to ask, because it's a season of giving, how to give to yourself, how to practice generosity toward yourself. And the comparison between generosity and indulging, because the culture is always telling you, "Oh, you deserve..." And then what happens with addiction is that it gets psychologically reversed, and it becomes the way to actually give in a way that is meaningful or filling the needs that don't get addressed, you know? You start indulging instead of it.

So great. That's a great question, a fantastic question. The difference between taking care of oneself and practicing in a way that, in this way, focuses on self in a way. And when is that healthy, and when is it narcissistic, when is it self-indulging?

And one of the things I find myself as a teacher, it's sometimes hard for me, even when people come and talk to me about their practice, for me to notice. You see, this is only occasionally. Don't worry, you know, there's no one here talking to me. But it's hard sometimes to see the difference in a student between when they're narcissistically self-involved with their practice and when it's actually a healthy self, you know, personal mindfulness.

Because you sit here, you retreat, for example, in meditation. You sit, you close your eyes, and the primary thing you notice is what's going on in this psychophysical being here. So you start noticing your tensions and the activity of your mind, your feelings, your emotions. And so then it makes sense, you know, that's what you're grappling with, working with. And

so you come and talk to a teacher. You talk about, you know, "I had this experience. This is what happened to me." Seems reasonable.

But then sometimes it just feeds into this narcissism of self, and I'm the most important, you know, it's all about me, and, you know, I'm negotiating the self and all this. So how to negotiate that is, anyway, as a teacher I find it occasionally hard. Sometimes it's not hard. Sometimes it's clear. It's narcissistic. But sometimes I feel, how do I find that difference?

And so I think not knowing that there's an issue, I think it's important. And I don't think I have any good answer for you. I wish I did. But I believe that if it's narcissistic or self-indulging, if a person is sensitive, if the mindfulness is strong, they can feel how that's off. They can feel the suffering or the tension that's part of that, the restriction or the tightening or the hardness that's involved in that. But it requires being very, very calm and sensitive.

So if you do like the movement thing you can do and get really calm and relaxed and peaceful, that's a place. From that place, then you might be able to see that when it becomes selfish or self-indulging in some way, there's a way in which there's a tightening up that happens, a limiting, a constriction, boundaries get set. But when the practice is leading to a greater peace that's more open, there's less boundaries. It's less things to protect, less constriction, less tightening. So that's the best I've come up with so far.

One question of the example that you gave. When I get, as a child, I sit with your family, you're admitting your fight with your child is difficult to another group of people, because other families are never. And I was wondering if there's any way, when the person is admitting difficulties somehow, to have a strategy to deal with the people who seem to be inflexible about that. That's my bag. What's a strategy?

I think there's a strategy, two general categories of strategies I could think of sitting right here. One is, one, not be too concerned about what they think about you, you know. So I think not being concerned with being liked, or, you know, people don't like you, or they criticize you. People say all kinds of things. And so not to be so sensitive to it. Don't care. Well, you know, it's unfortunate they're saying that. It's unfortunate for them. It's quite unfortunate for the group. It's unfortunate for me. But I'm not going to pick it up. I'm just going to let it be to me like an umbrella, and this is the rain, and you let it wash off. So there's a very healthy way of doing that. That's one strategy.

The other strategy, which is much more difficult, I don't know which is more difficult, but the other strategy is to have the social skills, the communication skills, to work with that. And so it might be as simple as saying, could be, I can imagine, sometimes very wise, just simply,

and it's not offensive, it's not criticizing them for saying what they did, but the parent might have sat there and said, "Oh, ouch, ahh." And that could be really wise. Oh, then everyone sees it had an impact here.

But if the person said, "You don't know what you're talking about, you know, that's really disrespectful of me," then suddenly it's in conflict. But if you say, "Ouch," then I think all, I think, you know, it has a chance. So "ouch" could be a very sophisticated form of communication. But there might be, you know, there's the whole learning social communication, learning techniques of how to talk wisely. And I'm still learning, you know. It's not, it's a big thing.

Thank you for your talk, Gil. I was reminded of an example. You used the example in the tradeoff between self and others in context. I was reminded of an early example that I learned here very poignantly from Tanceff, who has taken many more than the five precepts. But he was talking about trading off values, or letting go of a personal value that he had taken, one of the five precepts, when he was at dinner as a guest in an element of hospitality.

And he said, although he had taken the precept not to kill and therefore made the personal choice not to eat meat, that in the circumstance that he was presented with a plate of meat as a gesture of generosity on behalf of the host, that he would gratefully accept that gift. So trading off a value that was dear to his heart in exchange for accepting that which was offered with a grateful heart, I found that to be the most moving tribute. And I just wanted to share it as it occurred to me to be a second example to yours of the issue around vaccination.

Thank you for your talk. Thank you. So I have recently read an article in *Tricycle* that relates to this idea, peace. And what was the... yes, it was about a *zendō* in New York where they combined martial arts with mindfulness. And one of the students had worked his way up to become a teacher, was very violent. He was surrounded by violence, and they were quite used to being searched by the police, and they would react.

You know, before they were involved with the *zendō*, they would react in a violent or upsetting way, and the police would get more aggressive. So this particular student decided, worked himself up, that he was just going to submit to the search, because he recognized that the police would stereotype all these kids. And by submitting to the process, he had no idea he had to let go of was self-victimization. And by letting go of that as the police searched, he noticed that the police got more relaxed and it became a nonissue, a nonevent.

So this was using skillful means, both from the peaceful aspect of sitting meditation and using martial arts to channel these violent tendencies, in contrast to the nonviolence that also

manifested itself by his willingness to let go of the self-victimization. Great, lovely.

This is a question about receiving *Dharma*, that in our center here we have various kinds of views of *Dharma* talks from different teachers or traditions. And I particularly have a problem with *sesshin* talk, which we quite often have. I've had more than one occasion when the person next to me turns and says, "Wasn't that a great talk?" And I am, like, boiling mad because it was so obscure I couldn't figure it out. Though I struggle with this, because some of it is personal preference, that I like the straightforward, but I still struggle with it a little bit in terms of how can I relax that and find the *Dharma*?

How could you find the *Dharma*, and so on? Well, it may be an indirect kind of way of approaching your question, starting indirectly. Probably the most common comment I get at IMC about the Zen talks given here is the comment, "I thought it was a great talk, but when it was over I didn't know what they talked about." So, you know, there is sometimes an obscure quality or a complex quality to the way Zen talks are offered. And some of it might be very skillful. Some of it might be unskillful on the part of the teacher. That's what they do.

And so I think, you know, it might be nice for you now to find the *Dharma* in the Zen, but it might actually be more meaningful for you not to look at the Zen and the teaching, what's going on there. Let that be what it is. But to look at what your relationship is to not understanding. And there might be a rich field in which a number of relationships that you are forming with that would be useful for you to look at and grapple with, until such a point where you could come to sit here in a talk and say, "That was obscure. I have no idea what they talked about. But, you know, I'm okay. I'm not angry and not upset."

And, you know, what is it that happens inside of you that figures you to get angry? And I'm not saying it's for your situation at all. But it could be that someone could feel like, "I don't understand what's going on here. This means that I'm somehow at fault. I'm not smart enough." Therefore I'm getting angry, frustrated at myself, and so now I'll take it out on the speaker, because there must be, someone has to be to blame for the suffering I'm feeling. So it's to look at that. And I think the *Dharma* for you might be more deeply found by looking at your relation to all this than by trying to discover what's there in Zen.

Now, once you've come to that place where you can peacefully listen to a *Dharma* talk which is maybe even problematic, let alone obscure, then perhaps you're in a better place to pull apart and find the pearls that might be in there. Make some sense? Yes, thank you.

But now to answer your question most directly: where do I find the *Dharma* in Zen? This is one thing I learned, at least when I was practicing Zen and listening to *Dharma* talks, was

maybe you don't find it in the words, but you find it in how the person is. So some people are tracking the words really carefully, and the logic of the words, and, you know, that's what people look for, they understand. But sometimes in Zen, it's how the person's showing up there when they give the talk, what they're manifesting, how they are. That's where the Zen is being conveyed.

It's not being conveyed in the meaning of the words, but in the spirit, the mind, in which the person's there. And so maybe if you listen, don't listen to the words, but listen to, you know, something more obscure, more personal, something more. Now you listen to some of the inner qualities of the person there being expressed.

I remember many years ago, some 25 years ago, hearing a talk by Les Kaye, who was the abbot of the Mountain View Zen Center. And I was so inspired by the talk. And what inspired me was what I could feel coming through, what I sensed was his, by that point, 25 years of real strong intention and practice. To feel someone's intentionality, 25 years of really strong intention around practice, that's what really, you know, inspired me. What he actually said in the talk, I don't remember to this day. I don't remember, you know, what he said. But I still have a palpable feeling of this man with his very strong intentionality there.

And someone else, you know, it's there. I remember there was one priest at Zen Center, Tom Gerda, who gave a *Dharma* talk, and while he was giving it he brought with him an early copy, a copy of the early edition of *Inquiring Mind*, I think that's what it was. And I had never seen anybody at Zen Center get up and read a newspaper, there's a Buddhist newspaper, read an article from a newspaper as his *Dharma* talk. I mean, you're kind of like, young officers aren't supposed to do that. Officers not only aren't even supposed to have notes back when I was there. He was just going to show up. But just be yourself, right?

And he had this, for me, quality of just acceptance, of just being. This is what he was. He wasn't trying to be anything special. He wasn't trying to be a special teacher. You know, he wasn't trying to manifest anything. And in that self-acceptance, you know, for me, it was just being there, and it was actually more self-accepting. And I don't remember at all what it was he read, but his ease in which he just was there was meaningful for me.

I remember going to one of your retreats, and it was on sensual desire. And you had first an exercise talking between another person, and that person was talking for ten minutes. And then you had us not say anything for five minutes, and then that was my turn, and doing five minutes of silence. And I realized how beneficial it was, because for the first time, really, I realized how much information was coming my way. And having five minutes to sit with that information, to me, gives me a lot of peacefulness.

And then when we have difficult things in life, it's a lot of information coming our way, and often we want to react to it right away. But I realized just sitting with it, kind of retreating, and if I didn't refuse within myself, then I could find peace. And then I was able to blossom and go back and open up because I dealt with it. And often the peace we can find is when you take the time, you swallow, you digest, you kind of retreat yourself, and then you can open up again and share things.

Beautiful. Very well said. Thank you very much. There's sometimes, in the *Arnold* extended circles, the instruction in speaking might be wise speaking: listen, pause, and then speak. And something very rich can happen in that pause.

So, well, thank you very much. And thank you for the year and for coming here, and particularly thank you for the mutual quality in which I feel supported by you, and we all support each other. And I really feel like a *Dharma*, a *Dharma*, something we share. And really what should be sitting here up on the podium is the *Dharma*, and I should be sitting on the side, because really *Dharma* is our teacher. The *Dharma* we share, and the *Dharma* as we recreate this interactive, mutual, beneficial way in which we support each other and practice together. So I feel very fortunate to be able to practice with all of you who come here, and I look forward to another year of it. Thank you.